

USSR/NAVAL  
MISHAP

RATHER: It has come to light that there was a massive, apparently accidental, explosion in the Soviet Union last month, 900 miles north of Moscow. It occurred at a munitions depot for the Soviets' northern fleet. Bill Lynch at the Pentagon has the details.

LYNCH: When the Soviet northern fleet wrapped up its large-scale maneuvers in April, it returned to its home port of Severomorsk, a sprawling naval complex rivaling the U.S. base at Norfolk. In mid-May, U.S. intelligence got the first indication of catastrophe there from infrared sensors on an early warning satellite designed to detect Soviet missile launches. A lower-flying spy satellite was then sent over to photograph the damage. Those pictures convinced U.S. analysts a massive explosion had destroyed up to a third of the fleet's missile stockpile. Moscow's chief spokesman was asked today about the unreported disaster. LEONID\ZAMYATIN: I haven't seen that information and, therefore, I can't to (sic) give you an answer, true or not.

LYNCH: While a setback for the northern fleet's fighting ability, the Severomorsk's munitions disaster is not viewed by military experts as a long-term problem. SIR\JAMES\EBERLE (former NATO commander): These dumps can be replaced. There'll be less overall. I wouldn't see it as a crippling blow to the northern fleet.

LYNCH: Because the Soviet military has suffered other recent explosions, Western experts suspect lax safety procedures in storing and handling ammunition, some of it old and unstable. TED\WARNER (Rand Corporation): If the Soviets were poor enough in their procedures either to have ignited such a (sic) explosion in the handling of equipment or merely because they didn't heed proper environmental controls to perhaps things already stored in some depot, yes, it does seem to say that they have some serious shortcoming.

LYNCH: Some analysts see major hazards in the rapid Soviet buildup of munitions and fuel stockpiles. The Russians have added 16 such depots in this year alone in East Germany. The Soviet military press has lately warned against sloppy ammunition handling, but U.S. officials expect more such disasters, hoping only that the carelessness does not extend to chemical and nuclear weapons. Bill Lynch, CBS News, the Pentagon.